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The Power of Adversity:
A Performative Investigation on Enduring Suffering

APPROVED BY
SUPERVISING COMMITTEE:

William Bloodgood, Supervisor

Sven Ortel, Co-Supervisor

Jason B Buchanan

**The Power of Adversity:
A Performative Investigation on Enduring Suffering**

by

Mingxiang Ya

Thesis

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at Austin

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

The University of Texas at Austin

May 2021

Dedication

To ourselves.

To the ability to smile bravely when suffering.

To the power that rises to the sun in darkness.

Abstract

The Power of Adversity: A Performative Investigation on Enduring Suffering

Mingxiang Ya, MFA

The University of Texas at Austin, 2021

Supervisor: William Bloodgood, Sven Ortel

The COVID-19 pandemic has claimed the lives, jobs and stress of many people. It has exacerbated the existing severe mental health and drug use problems. Suicide and depression are side effects of this epidemic.¹ People often suffer misfortune, feel isolated and helpless, without any means to comfort themselves. However, I discovered that some people are well equipped and cope with adversity in a different way.

One of the most widely spread beliefs is, Buddhism. It provides people with spiritual sustenance so that mankind can gain relief from the suffering of this world, make people hopeful through introverted and deep ways. Buddhists believe that life is endless with cycles of re-becoming. It is affected by the three marks of existence which include

¹ Mark É. Czeisler, Rashon I. Lane, et al, “Mental Health, Substance Use, and Suicidal Ideation During the COVID-19 Pandemic — United States.”, *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 14 Aug. 2020, www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/69/wr/mm6932a1.htm

impermanence, suffering and no-self², trust dharma itself is a method as a way to eliminate suffering. How do Buddhists practice, how do Buddhists face up to adversity? And in this way, can a belief in the practice deliver a universal understanding and contribute its vitality that to counter the adversity individuals are facing?

I ask myself the following questions:

- (1) How do Buddhists gain their strength from their belief and does this strength provides a universal acknowledgment for all people?
- (2) How can I utilize design elements successfully as the visual language to create a performance with a universal comprehension?
- (3) How could I as an integrated media designer successfully communicate the teachings of Buddhism to American and international audiences?

To answer these questions, I interviewed local Buddhists and investigated how they live their life during a pandemic, discussed how Buddhism teaches them to go through this difficult time. Then, I adapted their experiences into a contemporary performance. After the publication of the virtual performance, I conducted deep conversations with the audiences and sought feedback and suggestion. Subsequently, I measured the level of success by communicating with my audiences about the feedback they provided, and specifically what they took away from witnessing the performance.

² “Three marks of existence.”, *Wikipedia*, Wikipedia Foundation, 19 Mar. 2021, www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Three_marks_of_existence

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Chapter 1: Introduction: Background, Research and Experience

PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

A CHINESE

I was born and raised in Bozhou, China. A small city in Central China with 3000 years of history. It is also the birthplace of Taoism. My mother is originally from the Hui community which is called the Ningxia Hui National Autonomous Region. Hui is one of many Chinese ethnic minorities believing in Islam. However, my family has believed in Buddhism for as long as I can remember. This mixed cultural background influenced me in subtle ways and shaped my mind deeply. I have been interested in religious cultures and experienced their impact subconsciously to varying degrees while I was growing up.

In the fall of 2017, I graduated from Shanghai Theatre Academy. I applied to graduate school in the United States and was admitted to the University of Texas at Austin. It was a dream of mine to experience my graduate academic life and it also opened up a new chapter on my intercultural episode. I am vastly experiencing the diversity of cultures. There are some differences between the cultures of different nations and countries, but also some similarities. In more cases, the exchanges and collisions between them are to learn from each other. Every nation has its own unique national culture, and the core of each national culture is the values and ways of thinking embedded in the deep within.

Now we all are suffering from the influence of COVID-19. As a Chinese who studies abroad, I am passionate about using my capacity and knowledge to build up a bridge

that could potentially connect the emotions of people, particularly those who have different cultural background and religions.

AN ARTIST

I started to learn academic drawing by pure chance when I was in the third grade of primary school. I have not been able to stop since. I love art, as it carries the collective knowledge of human civilization and the pursuit of beauty. It represents the spirits of different civilizations, races and nations in each era. It has experienced the cycle of rebirth, glory, suffering, and prosperity in the long river of history, and has continued to elaborate the creation and thinking of contemporary artists.

As an art student and designer, I throw myself into reality, experience the world and life, and perceive the depth of being. This study and practice in school enabled me to gain a lot of professional knowledge and master related professional skills. Discovering the truth and following the truth is what I have spared no effort to pursue in my life as an artist.

A TOUCH ON BUDDHISM

Buddhism is such a profound and mysterious subject; the literal meaning of Buddha simply means pain comes from desire; Buddhists are people who believe in this law. And the Buddha's basic teaching, encapsulating the entire Buddhist path is called as Four Noble

Truths, the First Noble Truth of Buddhism is trusting that suffering does exist,³ so how can I escape?

The first instrument I ever played was a wooden fish clock in my house, that perhaps was the beginning of my personal history with Buddhism. My parents have been devout Buddhists for decades - for longer than I am old. When I was young, our house was much smaller than now, and the entire house was often surrounded by the echo of chanting. I am greatly influenced by my parents and family atmosphere. Although I cannot describe myself as a Buddhist, I am deeply attracted to the culture and philosophy of Buddhism. I have climbed three thousand meters above sea level to experience Tibetan Buddhism in Shangri-La, visited the golden temples of Southern Buddhism in Bangkok and Phnom Penh, prayed to Northern Buddhism in Tokyo, sought the enlightenment of Mahayana Buddhism through practices in Shanghai and much more.

Last year during the initial lockdown and quarantine, I felt emotionally unstable. Stress followed me everywhere like a shadow. One day, I saw my mother in the Buddha hall at our house. She stayed many for hours alone inside. I observed her copy and recite scripture, kowtow and mumble words. Her silent routine triggered something in my mind and I started to wonder how she could be so calm during such an uncertain time. Then in May, the self-quarantine restrictions were lifted in China, but the local temple was still closed to prevent crowds from gathering. My mother traveled there every night and stayed inside of her car to chant, pray, and practice. Many other Buddhists there did the same. I

³ "Four Noble Truths.", *Encyclopedia of Buddhism*, 16 Nov. 2020, www.encyclopediaofbuddhism.org/wiki/Four_Noble_Truths#The_four_truths

empathized with their passion and sensed the inner strength along with a spiritual reality.

At that moment, I felt the touch of Buddhism.

SOCIAL BACKGROUND

LIVE WITH PANDEMIC

In December 2019, a case of unexplained pneumonia was found in Wuhan, Hubei Province, China which was later confirmed to be an acute respiratory infectious disease caused by the 2019 coronavirus infection, now referred to as Covid-19. The new type of coronavirus pneumonia is the most widespread global pandemic that humans have encountered in the past 100 years. It is a serious crisis and a severe test for the whole world. Human lives, their safety and health are facing major threats.

The epidemic covers us like an invisible web and affects every aspect of our life. In the past year, I heard and observed many stories during my everyday life. Many friends of mine lost their jobs, and there is no source of income. One of them had no time to return home, was trapped in an unfamiliar city, lived in the parking lot and found food in the trash. A man lost his loved ones and watched the body bag being transported onto the car. The cry was not loud, but it was especially clear on a deadly night. One was clearly not ill but committed suicide because of fear. Someone else was sick, but due to the lack of local medical resources, people with medical conditions could not get timely treatment and it was difficult to obtain medicine.

In this situation, some people are filled with indignation, others don't care. Optimistic people think that spring will come, but some people stay in winter forever. Light and darkness coexist, and both hope and despair must be remembered. The wheels of life are rolling forward and will always do. As far as we can see, cities and thousands of people

in these cities are gradually recovering, but in places we can't see, there are some people who need more time to come out of the haze. We can't see these people's faces clearly, just as these people couldn't see how to end the struggle at the moment, the pain in the world was oppressing their head, and the pain was finally covered by the thin mask.

We are unfortunate. We have to live during this difficult time and suffering. We are lucky as well, we could still explore the power to lighten the burden of our pain, with the power of adversity.

THE EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING

This COVID-19 pandemic is a major world-wide social stress event. It is not only the loss of individual lives that is straining the fabric of our societies, but also our ability to respond and grief for all that has been lost. In this unprecedented time, the epidemic continues to spread. Not only does the number of confirmed cases continue to rise, we have also seen more and more of its side effects. We might have a lot of complicated feelings, we might feel anxious, fearful and depressed, or constantly have panic attacks. Therefore, we need to redouble our efforts to manage ourselves and our emotions.

Many people feel submerged in all kinds of negative information. While feeling saddened by all kinds of things, they are also ashamed of their inability to move forward or out of their depressed state of mind. Under this fraught environment, people often show symptoms of a stress response. Stress response is an emotional reaction caused by hormones: When we are in a stressful environment, it causes a series of physical reactions in the brain: emotional or physical insomnia, abnormal work and rest, memory loss,

dizziness and chest tightness. In the meantime, the more negative information and news we are exposed to both virtually and physically in our environment, the more our stress response is stimulated.⁴ We might be unable to feel safe, lose confidence in ourselves or anyone else, lose our self-esteem, feel ashamed, feel helpless, empty, dull and numb, or become withdrawn and isolated. Maintaining emotional wellbeing is not an easy task under these current circumstances and not everyone can crawl out of the emotional swamp on their own. Many people are suffering from an excessive stress response conflict without even knowing it and are unable to extricate themselves.

⁴ Graham C.L. Davey, "The Psychological Impact of Negative News.," *Psychology Today*, 21 Sep. 2020, www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/why-we-worry/202009/the-psychological-impact-negative-new

Chapter 2: The Production Process

DIVE INTO BUDDHISM

BRIEF INTRODUCTION OF BUDDHISM

Buddhism originated in the ancient Indus Valley. The original meaning of Buddhism is the education of Buddha. It is more a philosophy than worship or religious teachings. This is because the most basic Buddhist concepts do not clearly describe a superior power or superstition. Buddhism teaches that people should not waste time thinking about concepts that are not helpful in eliminating pain. According to Buddhism, human beings, like the other six realms of existence,⁵ will fall into endless suffering and cycles of life and death. Only those who cut off their ignorance can leave these realms and stop reincarnation. The purpose of Buddhism is to follow and practice the four noble truths of enlightened Siddhartha, the truth of life and the universe, cut off all worries, and finally transcend life, aging, disease, death and pain, end the six reincarnated living Buddhas, and get liberated and enter Nirvana.

After Buddhism spread to every region around the world, and overtime was influenced by local societies, politics and culture, its form and content changed. This led to the formation of many branches. During the Han Dynasty Buddhism was introduced into mainland China from India through the Western Regions. As Buddhism continued to spread and evolve during the Han Dynasty, especially during the Northern and Southern Dynasties, most emperors believed in Buddhism and translated a large number of Buddhist

⁵ “Saṃsāra.”, *Encyclopedia of Buddhism*, 5 Jan. 2021, www.encyclopediaofbuddhism.org/wiki/Saṃsāra

scriptures. During this time the number of Buddhists and Buddhist scholars also increased unprecedentedly. In addition, within China Buddhism was also influenced by Taoism and Confucianism. As a consequence, China gradually formed its own unique Buddhist thoughts and theories, which led to the formation of individual Chinese Buddhist sects. To this day, China is the country with the most Buddhists.

BUDDHISM IN BOZHOU

Bozhou is not the most prestigious Buddhist city in China, but it does have a relatively rich Buddhist atmosphere and many different types of temples. It is worth mentioning that there is a temple in downtown Bozhou called Baiyilvyuan, also known as Baiyi Temple, it is named after the Avalokitesvara, who is the Bodhisattva of Compassion⁶. This temple is an important public monastery within the Anhui Province and a provincial cultural protection unit. The temple was built in the late Song Dynasty, prospered in the Ming and Qing Dynasties, and then flourished during the time of the Republic of China. It is one of the four major law schools in China. At this temple Buddhists gather from far and near, and it is also a place my mother visits almost every day. And it is also where this story begins.

⁶ “Avalokiteśvara.”, *Wikipedia*, Wikipedia Foundation, 9 Apr. 2021, www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Avalokiteśvara

DOCUMENTARY PERFORMANCE

INTERVIEW BASED STORY

As a theatrical storyteller, I was passionate to explore the potential of Buddhism to be the source and inspiration for a narrative. Also, as a media designer, I already sensed the visual fragments of stories that must be shared.

I started to ask myself about what kind of story can move people the most and what kind of story is the most profound at this moment? I researched the life of Bodhi, browsed the historic stories of Buddhism and also Buddhist myths and legends. They are all beautiful and fascinating. But something was missing. I felt the distance between the stories I read and everyday people, people who live in the present.

Art is inspired by life, and sometimes the most convincing voices can be found in stories that are true. Therefore, I decided to create a documentary performance. A documentary performance is a performance that uses documentary materials such as newspapers, periodicals, official reports, interviews, and conversations as source materials for real events and character stories. It usually does not alter the original text for the eventual performance. Because of my empathy for the emotions of my mother and her Buddhist friends, I was motivated to communicate with Buddhists around myself. They live in the moment, interact with the moment. During the pandemic, maybe they also suffered in the moment.

To begin with the research, I devised a multi-step process to create an original script from my research: First, I looked for individuals who were willing to be interviewed in the general public. I explained to the interviewees that the interviews will be transcribed after,

and those transcriptions will serve as the resource material for my performance. I had the chance to communicate with a wide variety of people that included monks who live in temples, Buddhists, Buddhist scholars and Buddhist industry workers. As part of the interviews I asked them when they came into contact with Buddhism, why they believed in Buddhism, and what Buddhism means to them in life and soul. I also asked about the impact of the pandemic on their life, and how they coped in the face of difficulties. Finally, I inquired about their research on the subject of the three marks of existence: suffering, impermanence and non-self. Subsequently, I organized the recorded interviews I had and transferred them into writing as monologues. Finally, I moved on to edit and sequence these monologues into an interviewed-based script.

EXCERPTS OF MONOLOGUE

In order to protect the personal privacy of the interviewees, no real personal information of any interviewees will be disclosed.

Below are excerpts from the monologue from Character A, who is a 32-year-old male:

This is what I really thought when I was in a very gloomy depression in my life this spring. At that time, because of the pressure of unemployment, the entire industry was very infiltrated, and it was difficult to find a job. What does it mean to change careers in your thirties? As an ordinary person so ordinary, I really feel the unprecedented pressure. My heart was gloomy and extremely depressed.

I could only eat a little bit of food every morning, and at noon I literally can't anything, no matter how well the food is cooked. If I am in a better mood at night, I can eat some; otherwise, I still have to force myself to eat because I don't want my wife to worry about it. I woke up at four in the morning and couldn't sleep. Every day, my chest is weighted as if pressed by a giant rock, and it seems to be difficult to breathe. It doesn't hurt, but it's very uncomfortable.

My colleague's new house was renovated, and he happened to be on a business trip, so he asked me to look after it. Standing at the top ten stories high from the balcony, I actually had the idea of jumping off, feeling that it was a relief. — I am depressed.

Below is excerpts of monologue from Character B, who is a local 26-year-old female:

Buddhism is definitely not the pursuit of induction, it is still necessary to make that clear at the beginning; The meaning of practice is only because we are wandering through life and death, whether day by day, year after year, or life after life. If we do not accumulate enough recognition for ourselves. If there is too little virtue or insufficient concentration, how can we talk about liberation and benefit all beings?

Induction is just a convenient way for Bodhisattvas to enhance the confidence of mortals. What they really require is wisdom and compassion. If you blindly seek induction, you will easily go astray and take advantage of all kinds of inducements. Therefore, you should not obsess too much. If you have one, you will be grateful, and you will not be greedy if there wasn't. What's more, if your inner heart is changed, the world will also feel. Mantra chanting, sitting and meditation, you still have to return to a pure and sincere

heart; Of course, if in the process, we are too utilitarian and absent-minded, we will not be able to seek merits too much. At that moment, we can invest in it and take every word and meaning of the scripture seriously, and we will be blessed by strength.

Below is excerpts of monologue from a friend who asked to remain anonymous:

In the back hill of Donglin Temple in Jiangxi province, there is a statue of Avalokitesvara, which is located in a small old Buddhist hall. When I first saw it, there was nothing special, I just thought it was one of many bodhisattvas. Out of respect, I knelt down on the mat and bowed. After the three prayers, I got up and put my palms together and looked at the statue of Avalokitesvara, then I was stunned. I saw tears flashing under the eyes of the Avalokitesvara statue. Thinking that I was wrong, I squeezed my eyes and looked again. Still there.

Almost at the same time, I felt the sadness in my heart, or received it. But not my own sadness. That sadness is true caring, sad because of my pain. There was no disappointment, no blame, no pity. I knew that this was compassion. It seems that every minute of my painful experience was understood by Avalokitesvara. This compassion is more than just caring, and really knowing me, feeling my feelings. The feeling of being known and understood, being cared for unconditionally. This heavy care was like a sea wave swept through my heart. After that, I drew close to the statue of Avalokitesvara, wanting to confirm that the tears I saw were real. But I could not find them anymore.

EXCERPTS OF SCRIPT

The completed script includes five scenes: *1000 Lotuses, Sprouted in Secularity*, *1000 Answer, Time of Silt* and *It's Compassion*.

Below is excerpts of *It's Compassion*:

Chen

I am better, and now I feel relaxed every day.

Ann

My solution is to treat pain as a treasure.

Mysterious seed that inspires one's great compassion and a sharpening stone.

Shirley

Once when I was chanting, I felt clearly in my heart, or received it.

Not from my sadness.

That sadness is true caring, sad because of my pain.

It's not disappointment, not blame, not pity.

I felt loved.

San

This is compassion.

Chen

If you don't experience pain, you don't know that there is so much pain in the world, and the world and sentient beings will have this kind of pain to experience.

Ann

If you do not experience pain, you will always close an eye to the pain of others. Pain is too important to you, it is your upward ladder.

Shirley

Whenever the pain is particularly uncomfortable, I do not burn incense, worship the Buddha, or read the scriptures, but silently pray in my heart:

Chen

I must achieve Bodhi, to save people who are as painful as I am.

I feel their pain now, and I am willing to bear the pain on their behalf.

Please transfer the physical and mental pain of every suffering being to me.

And I will bear it.

San

Study hard and practice hard, adversity is a good opportunity to practice.

Chen

Then, it will be lightened and faded.

LOCAL TEAM AND VENUE

TEAM MEMBER

When it came to plan the production team, I considered taking on the role of director, producer and designer. With the script finished. I was looking forward to its potential to inspire a great production. But I was facing a dilemma in how to successfully build my team. It was the middle of January when I planned to look for performers, but in China it was close to the time of the Lunar New Year. To control of the pandemic, the Chinese government had advised people to cancel non-essential travel and celebrate the New Year where you were. Therefore, I could not recruit performers from different cities who would have the ability to perform in English. At the same time, I was not able to gather enough local performers who could speak fluent English. So I asked myself, should I keep this performance as a theater play or change it into something else? I believed that in this production verbal language should not be a barrier in order to be understandable by international audiences, especially those who cannot communicate in Chinese. With all these considerations in my mind, I decided to adapt the original script into a contemporary dance performance.

After deciding to change the form of the performance to dance, first I translated the English script into Chinese. Then I started to consult with friends and art practitioners in Bozhou who are interested in joining this production. It must have been the advantage of being an art student at a young age, because I still had ties to many talented local artists even though I haven't properly stayed in my hometown for a decade. Through inquiries and recommendations, I ended with three dancers in this project. Their names are Peng Li,

Chang Lee and Qianwen Hua. Later, we had to reshuffle the team, but this was the original group.

Peng Li is a local artist with international experience. He studied martial arts at the Shaolin Temple since he was a child, and later performed around the world as part of a group as well as solo artist. In this production he was our choreographer and only male dancer. Chang Lee was our leading female dancer. She is a dance teacher at Bozhou Normal University. Lastly, Qianwen Hua is a student of Peng Li. After confirming the list of dancers, it was also a blessing to have voice-over artists join in this production: they were Kaiwen Fa, Racheal Zhang and Zoey Crow.

PERFORMANCE VENUE

To find the right venue for this production was also not easy because of COVID-19 since most of the venues were closed due to the epidemic. The remaining sites that were still accessible also had multiple layers of strict pandemic prevention and control measures. After a tireless search and much negotiation, we finally had our venue confirmed on February 10. It was the performance stage on the sixth floor of Bozhou Cultural Museum. The stage is 52.3 feet wide and 15.8 feet in depth, with an upstage LED screen which was 28 feet wide and 12.5 feet tall. The stage has the wooden floor and came with a basic lighting rig.

DEVELOPING THE DESIGN

DIRECTION OF CHOREOGRAPHY

Due to the limitation for the selection of performers, I decided that this production should be a dance rather than a play. Then, the body language is the key to tell everything we want to communicate. As a team we had to find a way to create a choreography and design based on the translated script. We also had to devise ways to use the body's movements and details to convey the dancer's thought expression. We were very conscious of the fact that it was to be a dance about Buddhism, and indicative of the experience of Buddhists, so we had to have a cohesive concept. Some of the team members were Buddhists or were familiar with the subject of Buddhism, but others were not. As the director, I felt that I could not let our team make any move until we clearly knew how to express accurately with the body what was written on the very first page. So, we read through the script again and again by role, we meditated along with the Buddhist music, organized temple visits and practiced activities. Just so that we can perceive and grasp the inspiration of a glimpse while we are experiencing the mystery of Dharma like the Buddhists in the story.

Dance is relatively abstract compared to theatre since theatre relies on spoken words for communicating and body expression of everyday life, but dance is defined as movement only. Although we did not plan to restore the content of the script word-by-word, we still would not depart from the script and create movement arbitrarily. For example, in the murals of the Mogao Grottoes, Buddhas soar freely in the air, some holding musical instruments while dancing, some holding lotus to spread seeds, and some dancing

long ribbons. Their postures are elegant, light and chic. During our concept conversations, regarding the choreography, Mr. Li put forward an excellent point that we repeat and express the highlighted content from the script, but not deliberately stereotype or heighten each action or movement. I sum this concept up as, “Loyal to the story, loyal to reality, and loyal to self”.

MEDIA AND SCENIC CHOICES

As an integrated media student who is also passionate about scenic design, it is always exciting to brainstorm a new work which combines these two disciplines. For this production, media and scenic together play a very important role. They should enhance the visual effect of the dance, make the artistic conception of the stage more attractive, and enrich the stage presentation. Also, scenography must stay true to the script and clarify the stage environment for both realistic or imaginary locations. These include temples and park in real life. Symbolic wonderland and places to express the inner world of the characters.

I asked myself, what should the visual language be for this piece? I immediately was drawn to the philosophical thoughts of traditional aesthetics in China. In eastern aesthetics, one of the most intelligent concepts is Zen, and Zen believes beauty is the complete detachment from worldly pain. It is peace and freedom. So, beauty is transcendence. Zen painting is one of the unique artistic expressions of Chinese painting. Its brushes are simple, the artistic conception is clean and pure, and the style is a practice of intuitive minimalism. Ancient Chinese artists loved landscape painting; they placed their admiration on mountains and rivers, believed that all things have a soul, and that there must be more

powerful forces who live in the mountains. The inky shapes of nature, temples, scriptures and sentient beings from those ancient paintings were floating in my mind. I grasped the impressions from my imagination and drew the Zen paintings in Adobe Photoshop for Scene One and Scene Three. I used contemporary digital technology to seek the aesthetic style passed down through generations from ancient times, and those paintings ended up serving as great backdrops to establish the locations during the performance.

Beside the representation of physical locations in the play, the purpose of media and scenery also focused on the inner emotions of the characters. For example, Scene Two it describes the struggle and suffering experience of the characters. We cannot find a unified location for suffering, but the abstraction of the inner feeling also needed to be shared via the media backdrops. In order to communicate the emotion of the characters to the audience, I let music animate the media and combine those two elements as whole to enhance the rhythm of a hanging heartbeat, and to render the character's inner loneliness, helplessness, and the depression that cannot be released. In Scene Four, the media artwork is more literal and informational: it is the reflected voice of the characters to show the process of their practice and the results of their cultivation. Buddhists believe in the truth of power derived from scriptures. I had approach Scene Five differently: In the script it says that the characters are willing to achieve Bodhi by receiving and bearing the pain from people who are suffering. In order to build a bridge between the characters and all living creatures, we pre-recorded the walking of a crowd and layered this content with a matching choreography performed by the dancers, to visually expand the size of the stage, and to create the feeling that we are surrounded by beings and interact with all dancers.

Personally, I think the scenic setup for dance performances should be mostly concise and suggestive. To continue with this project, I decided to design fewer physical scenic pieces, to open up the imaginative space as the artistic concept and thus to allow the audience to participate in the construction of the performance independently. Throughout the performance, we used the following stage props: Two chairs, a martial arts stick, a set of checkerboards, four blooming lotuses and one dry ice machine. These props each undertook irreplaceable functions and roles. They not only served to perfectly interpret the content and instructions required by the plot, but also the props provided dancers with more possibilities for physical movements. The performers were able to stand or sit or bend over or hold their heads up. With the support of this visual vocabulary enriching the presentation of dance, the media and scenic are truly integrated into the work and fulfill their intended mission and responsibility.

THE SOUND, LIGHTING AND COSTUME

After the design of the media and scenic environment, I started to work on the rest of the design disciplines. The first one was the sound. Sound design was prioritized because the performers need to adjust the choreography according to the rhythm of the music during the rehearsal. And music is an art form that is great at communicating feelings. It uses sound as a medium to truly convey, express and feel aesthetic emotions. In order to create an appropriate musical atmosphere, I connected the daily ambience sound of Buddhists with professional Buddhist practice music. I was able to not only immerse the audience in the voice of Buddhism, but also allow them to walk into the hearts of Buddhists and join

them to experience life. In addition, I integrated a voice-over element into the last scene. The purpose of those words was to emphasize the transcendence of the characters after discovering the power from the influence of Buddhism. one hand, and on the other hand to communicate with the audience more directly.

While I was finalizing the sound track, I also worked on lighting. Based on my understanding of lighting, the key is to be concise and logical. The lighting design is to meet the needs of people's visual physiology and aesthetic psychology, so as to maximize the practical value and appreciative value of the stage space, and to achieve unity of both its literal and aesthetic function. Our performance venue had its own lighting equipment, but there were a couple of limitations which did not allow for a more advanced design. The lighting equipment we had could not be compared to professional theatrical lights. For instance, all the lights were connected in series, so there was no way to control them individually, and it was impossible to control the fades with sufficient accuracy due to the age of the gear. However, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe said “Less is more”,⁷ and the limitations forced me to focus on what this performance really needed from the lighting design. Ultimately, with determination and willingness to experiment we achieved relatively successful results in lighting. It integrated harmoniously with the dancers’ movements and the other design elements into a whole.

After the lighting design, I focused on the costumes: Costume design to me is generally a practical art and has its own characteristics in terms of content, form and means

⁷ “Less is more”, Wikipedia, Wikipedia Foundation, 14 Dec. 2019, www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Less_is_more

of expression. For our performance, I believed that the shape of costumes should be elegant and plain. And the main principle to guide the costume design was to support the dancer's body movements with a natural flow of composition. I reduced the silhouette of the costumes to their essence to match the true practice of Buddhism. The true practice of Buddhism is harsh, and as a Buddhist, it is necessary to maintain a simple life. The highest state is even to wear shabby clothes but still keep the priceless treasures in heart. To design the costumes for performers, I unified the style and color for all dancers regardless of gender, just as Bodhi is genderless. The color were black and white, inspired by the wisdom of Yin Yang, Yin and Yang interact with everything, and everything in the world has the way of it. The fabric of the costumes was sackcloth, a traditional Chinese texture for clothes, and it represents the core of simplicity. It is the driving force behind the gestation, development, maturity, decline and death of various things. As the fabric fiber I chose linen, to represent the austere life of practice.

PERFORMANCE

UNEXPECTED EVENTS

After three weeks of rehearsal in the studio, we finally had the dress rehearsal scheduled. It was to be the first time for our dancers to actually feel the performance floor as well as to see all design elements come together. Unfortunately, the night before dress rehearsal one of our dancers had to quit the production for personal reason. None of us could predict this accident, but all departments had already agreed on rehearsal and recording dates. Considering the uncertainty of the epidemic and the schedule of the entire team, we could only rehearse in the space one time. This situation required us to find a suitable substitute dancer in just a few hours, and for her to quickly learn and become familiar with the existing choreography. This was an extremely challenging moment and I was deeply overwhelmed.

The dark cloud of misfortune did not dissipate even though we managed to reorganized the team. On the day of the recording of the performance, our lead dancer Chang and the choreographer Peng collided in Scene Five. In this scene, the dancers were required to run quickly on the stage. Because of the construction of the steps, she hit the structure and bounced, then fell to the ground. She was full of pain; she could not move and could not stop crying. After half an hour of adjusting her breathing and resting, she managed to finally stand up. But we decided to suspend shooting for the day and resume it later. I was so shocked that I could not think clearly. On the one hand, I was worried about the dancer's physical condition, and on the other hand, I was also considering whether she could continue to participate and what it would mean for the entire project. However,

change guaranteed us that she was in good physical condition and after communication with the entire team, we continued and completed the recording four days later.

FINAL PERFORMANCE

On February 28th, we finished the dance performance and the recording. I gathered a large number of live recorded videos and photos of the event to serve as source material for the film I intended to make of it. My goal was to share the work and communicate with the audience via the internet.

After all the ups and downs, there finally was a perfect ending. I felt deeply blessed and grateful for the time I spent with my entire production team. Looking back onto this journey now I am thinking how ironic it would be if I were not able to overcome such insignificant difficulties while I am investigating the power of adversity?

BUILDING THE WEBSITE

For the best viewing experience for the audience at present , I decided to build a website so that I could not only share the performance with an audience virtually, but also could present my working process, showcase our team members and allow for a potential way to gather feedback. Along with this direction, I built the website with the context and bought my personal domain *thepowerofadversity.cn*. To be able to successfully publish the performance website, I verified my identity through the Real-name Authentication system and bound the website to my personal account as part of the requirements from the Internet Information Service and Management of the People's Republic of China.

Until now, my thesis performance ended successfully.

Chapter 3: On Response and Reflection

AUDIENCE RESPONSE

On Mar. 21 I officially published my thesis website and shared it with the public audience. I was investigating the spiritual substance of enduring suffering through the lens of an interview-based contemporary dance. I measured the level of success via the communication with your audience and the feedback your received from individuals who saw the performance and visited the website. Overall, I communicated with many audiences through phone call, email and social media, and in-person conversations. Among I had in-depth discussions with eighteen of them. Their backgrounds include undergraduate and graduate students majoring in theatre or dance, academic professors focusing on the teaching of dance, design and directing, theater performance enthusiasts, and people engaged in other non-art industries. Moreover, the group had mixed with diverse cultural backgrounds and came from different countries such as America, China, Japan, United Kingdom, France, Belgium, etc.

The original guiding questions I set out to investigate were:

1. Could the experience of Buddhists provide a cultural transcendence for people in different races and religions?
2. Could I as an integrated media designer successfully communicate the teachings of Buddhism to American and international audience?

The conversations and responses from the audience, they proved that: Yes! I can, and I did.

Some of the feedback included:

- I was really impressed with how beautifully your video and sound turned out from a technical standpoint. Crystal clear audio and images. Really lovely.
- I loved this so much. It was peaceful, but also mildly disturbing at times. I was dazzled when the pavilion lit up!
- In Scene 2 - the way you combine quotidian gestures with synchronicity really spoke to me about how the experience of Covid-19 has felt so isolating but is also quite universal.
- This is such lovely work from top to bottom. I love the conversation you've continued since Documentary Theatre about universal suffering. What could be more relevant and important than that right now?
- The fifth scene brings it all together with the emptying of the screen and the presence of those actual flowers. The blossoming of hope. So, so great.
- You developed your own language, overall the performance feels very comfortable, very poetic. It's peaceful and I am healed.
- Cultural barriers, congratulations on breaking this successfully.
- The digital imagery was striking, greatly altering the proscenium space in each section and not overpowering the performers. By alternating traditional, realistic scenes with abstract design I understood you were connecting an ancient practice to the current moment.
- The only pity was that the refresh rate of the LED screen has been captured at high frame rates, so the flickers could be distracting sometimes.

- When I work with dance and projection, I look for what moving image can do that lighting or scenic design cannot. For example, in section 2, the dots pulsing in time with the music was an effective minimal choice.
- As the performing arts have been changed forever in this pandemic, what of the current limitation might serve your curiosity? How might this work have changed if it were captured as a dance film, and not a documentation of a stage dance? How might your media design transport us to even more worlds? How are you seeing the website as more than documentation, but part of the performance itself? What else might be possible there? These are questions I'm asking myself at this time, too!
- I appreciate how the projection multiplied the small ensemble of dancers, especially with the repeated phrase "the pain of every suffering being."
- Wow. I was so moved by the beauty and craft involved and felt so many emotions while taking in the candid, loving, soulful, vulnerable and meditative performance. It's exquisite.

With all response from my lovely audience, each sentence of feedback, comment and critique is extremely valuable and constructive in order to measure the level of the success of my overall thesis production. Their generous compliments and criticisms are the best "intermission" for my public presentation.

PERSONAL REFLECTION

Now that I think back to the beginning of conceiving the theme of my Thesis, to the step by step implementation and realization, to the present and the writing of its summary, it is like a beautiful dream: It has fatigue, boredom, anxiety and depression. But it is more of a harvest after hard farming, a satisfaction with the result of the accomplishment, and a passion to create something meaningful in adversity.

Words cannot express how humble and flattered I am with the praise from the audience. However, I do have some personal thoughts on what I could have done if I were able to create this production again.

First of all, I did not reasonably expect the workload to concurrently hold several titles (director, producer, playwright and designer) in one production. The huge amount of work and the tight schedule made it impossible for me to devote myself deeply to each role. In other words, under the limiting circumstances, I had to sacrifice some details and content. Since I am a professional integrated media designer, it was a torture that I could see how I could expand the media design more but could not because of the time. So, if I were able to manage my schedule better, in this way I would like to focus more on my design in the future.

Secondly, I wish I would had more of a chance to spend time with my performers: maybe travel together to some temples, read scriptures loudly and practice more often.

More time to achieve a more cohesive understanding for Buddhist philosophy, to be more conscious with how the spirituality of Buddhist impression might flow by our choreography and to create a better performance to the social public.

Also, I wish I would have presented this performance to an in-person audience. I wish I would have written the story with more participation from the interviewees. I wish I would have done... However, I realize that maybe it is important to have some regrets to make this production more complete. Since every time I see it, the corners of my mouth will rise.

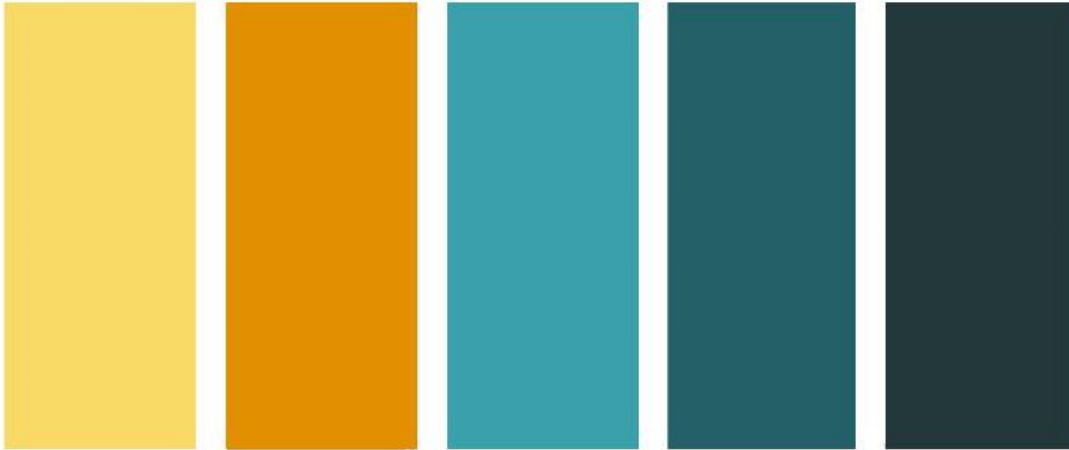
So far, this section of the story is about to say goodbye now, but the pandemic has not gone away from us. There are still human beings in pain, and people who are lost in suffering. I hope we all can discover our own power, with the power of adversity. I also hope that my thesis production can give some comfort to restless minds in this unsettled time. Even if it can light up the subtlest light for you, it is and will always be the direction I pursue with all my strength.

Farewell, to those who are among all living beings.

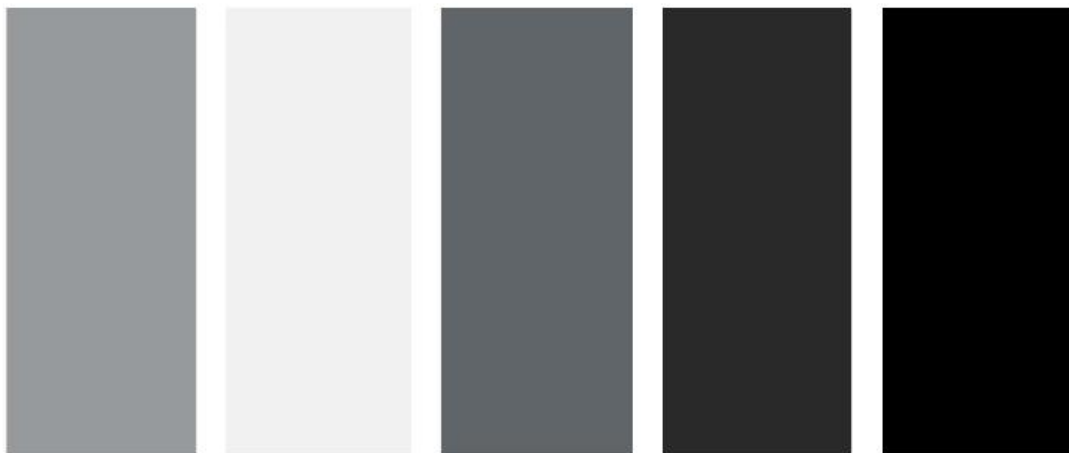
APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: LIGHTING COLOR PALETTE

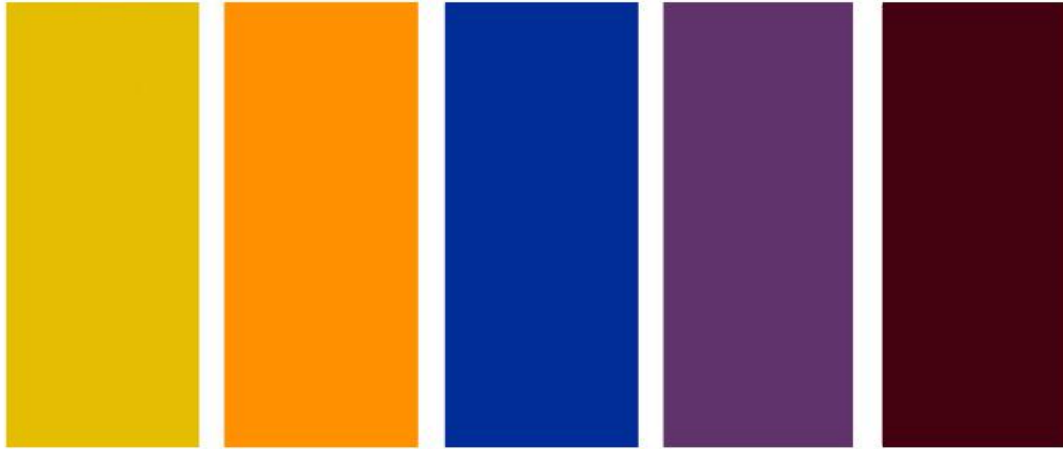
This appendix includes the color reference of lighting for the performance.



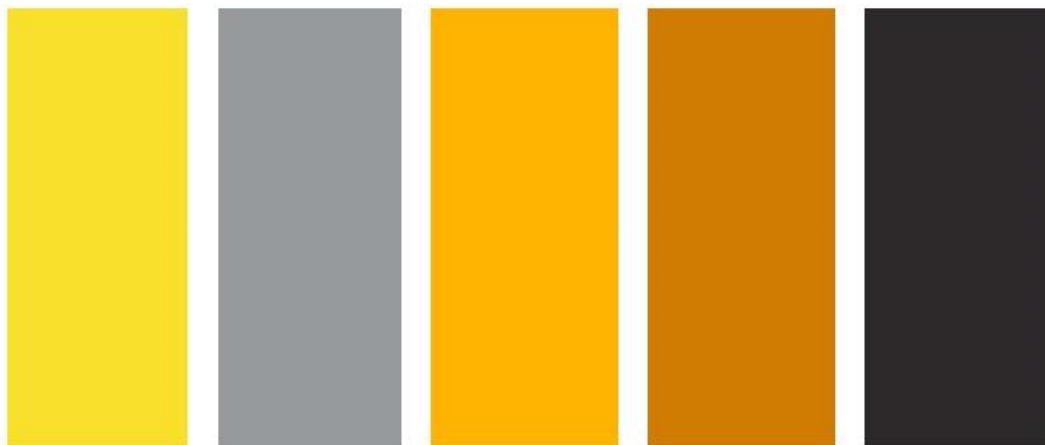
A1: Scene One – *1000 Lotuses* Lighting Color Palette



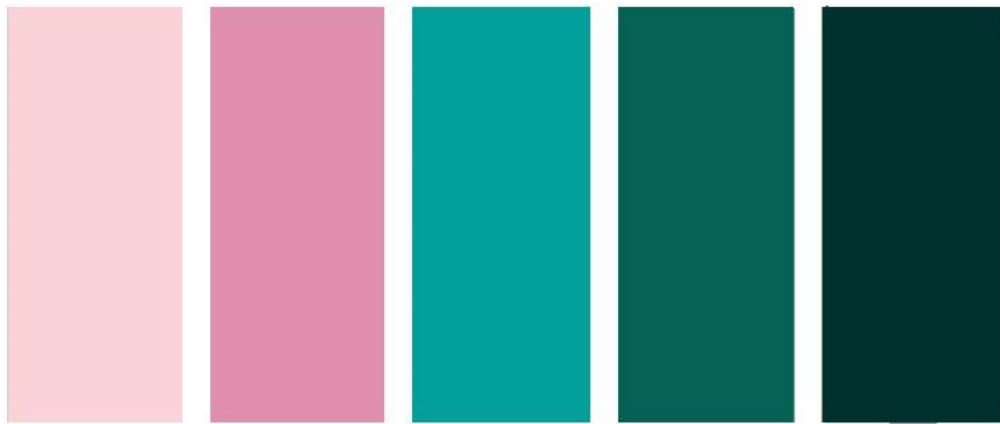
A2: Scene Two – *Sprouted in Secularity* Lighting Color Palette



A3: Scene Three – *1000 Answers* Lighting Color Palette



A4: Scene Four – *Time of Silt* Lighting Color Palette



A5: Scene Five – *It's Compassion* Lighting Color Paleta

APPENDIX B: PROPS AND COSTUME

This appendix includes the props and costume that used in the performance



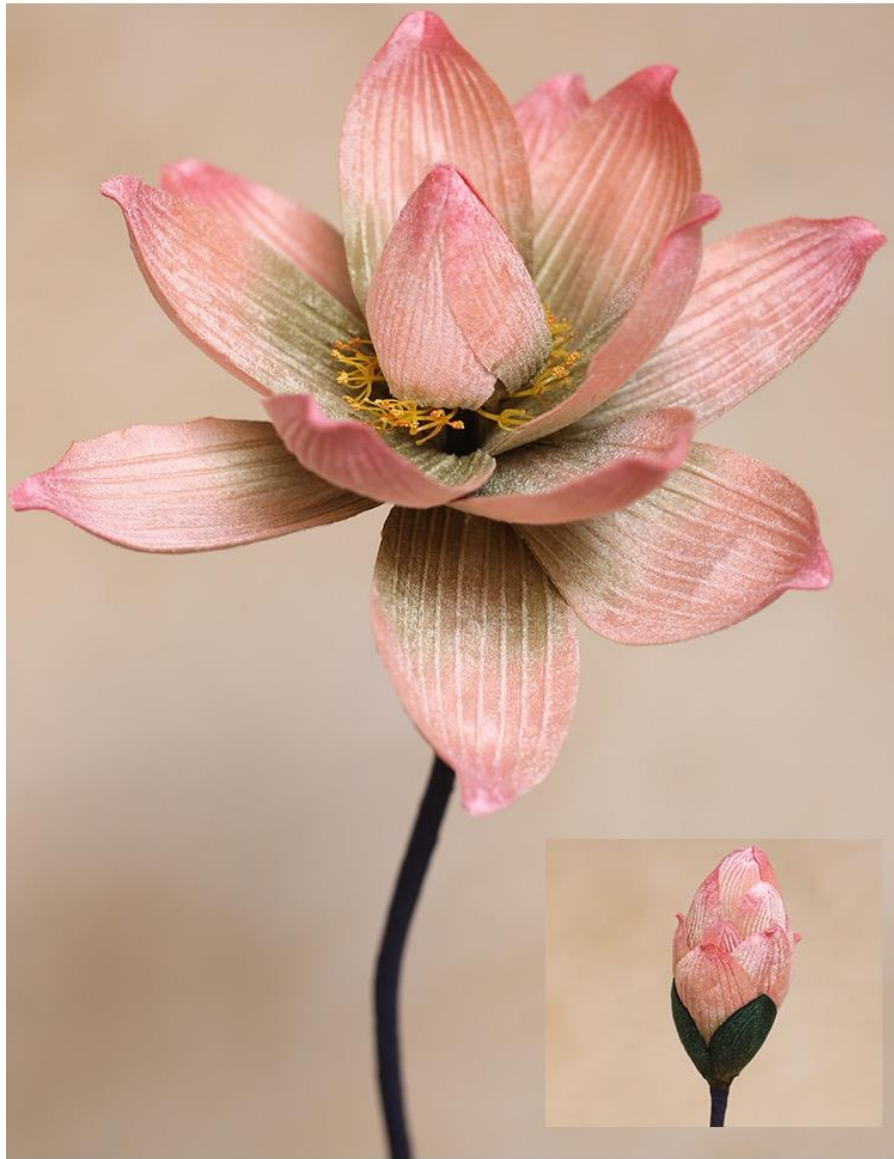
B1: A Linen Shirt



B2: A Folding Chair



B3: A Chessboard



B4: A Lotus



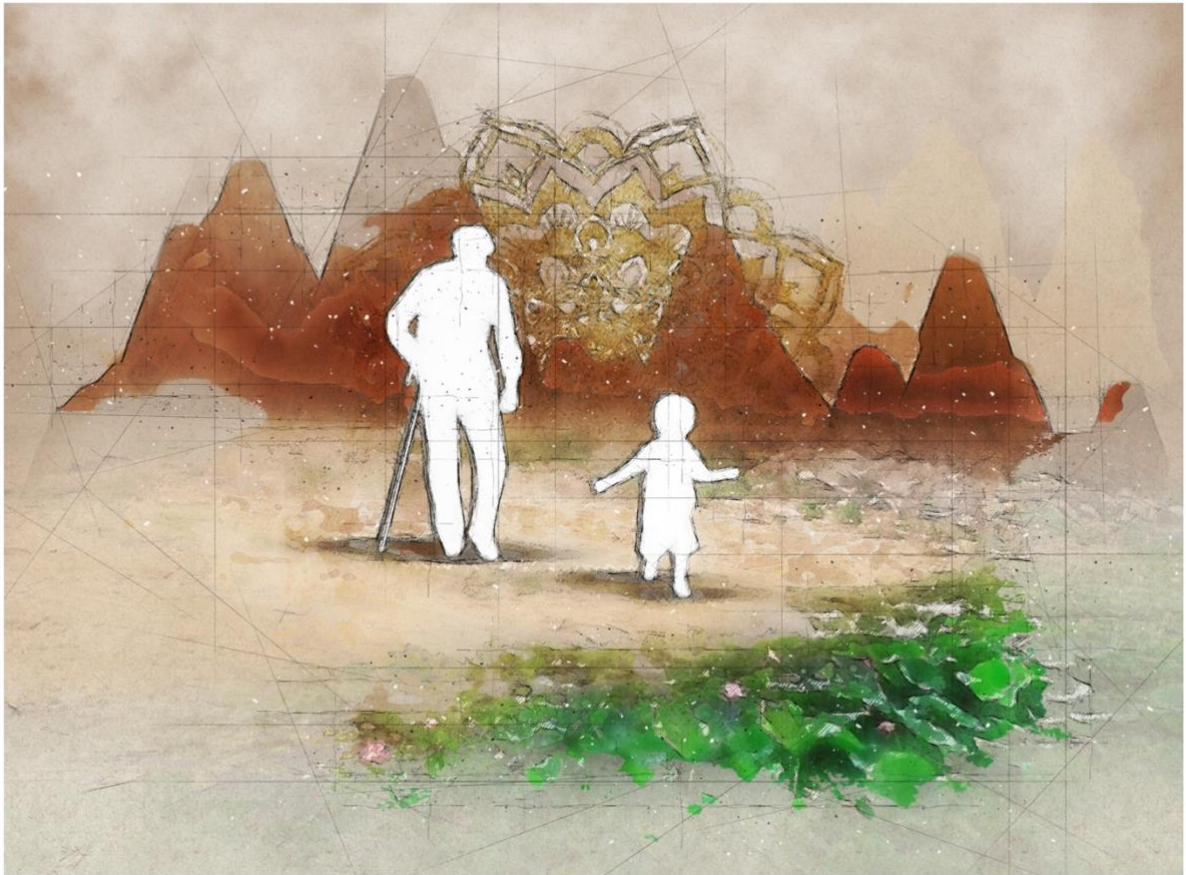
B5: A Group of Lotus Seeds



B6: Cudgel for Martial Art

APPENDIX C: MEDIA RENDERING

This appendix includes digital media rendering for the performance.



C1: Scene One – *1000 Lotuses* Media Rendering



C2: Scene Four – *Time of Silt Media Rendering*



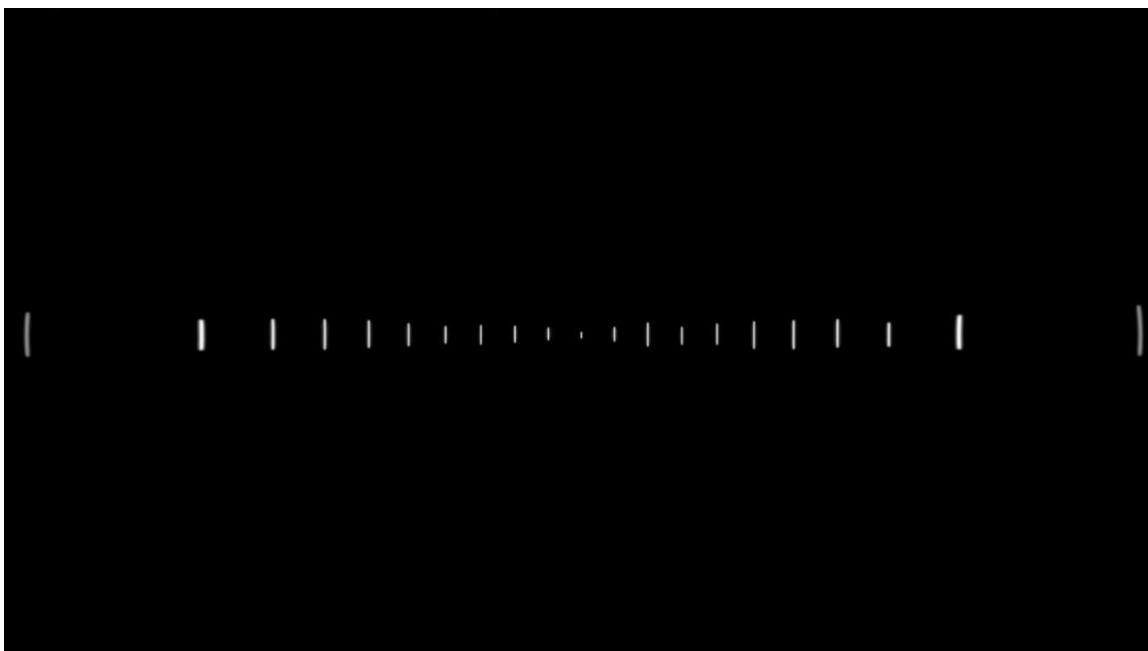
C3: Scene Five – *It's Compassion* Media Rendering

APPENDIX D: MEDIA CONTENT

This appendix includes media content that was displayed on the LED screen.



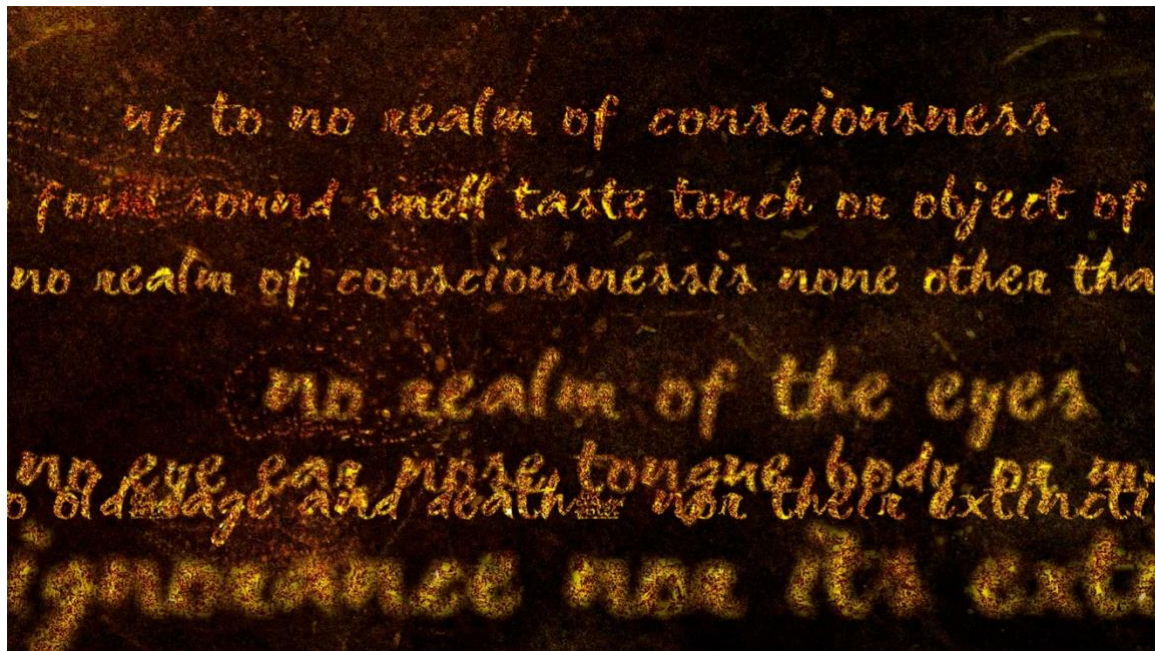
D1: Scene One – *1000 Lotuses* Media Content



D2: Scene Two – *Sprouted in Secularity* Media Content



D3: Scene Three – *1000 Answers* Media Content



D4: Scene Four – *Time of Silt* Media Content



D5: Scene Five – *It's Compassion* Media Content

APPENDIX E: PRODUCTION PHOTO

This appendix includes photos taken of the performance.



E1: Scene One – *1000 Lotuses* Production Photo



E2: Scene One – *Sprouted in Secularity* Production Photo



E3: Scene Three – *1000 Answers* Production Photo 1



E4: Scene Three – *1000 Answers* Production Photo 2



E5: Scene Four – *Time of Silt* Production Photo 1



E6: Scene Four – *Time of Silt* Production Photo 2



E7: Scene Five – *It's Compassion* Production Photo 1



E7: Scene Five – *It's Compassion* Production Photo 2

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